

## Message Text

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PAGE 01 NEW DE 09778 111334Z  
ACTION NEA-10

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FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI  
TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 4617

C O N F I D E N T I A L NEW DELHI 9778

EO 11652: GDS  
TAGS: OVIP (CHRISTOPHER, WARREN)  
SUBJ: BRIEFING PAPERS FOR DEPUTY SECRETARY'S VISIT

REF: STATE 157966

1. IN RESPONSE TO REFTTEL, EMBASSY SUBMITS BRIEFING  
PAPER ON MORARJI DESAI, PRIME MINISTER OF INDIA.

2. DISCIPLINED, STRONG-WILLED AND ASCETIC, MORARJI  
R. DESAI, 81, BECAME INDIA'S FOURTH PRIME MINISTER ON  
MARCH 24, FOLLOWING THE NEWLY-FORMED JANATA PARTY'S  
STUNNING ELECTORAL VICTORY. IN OUR DEALINGS WITH IM  
SO FAR, WE HAVE FOUND DESAI WARM AND FRIENDLY TOWARD  
THE US AND, IN PARTICULAR, PRESIDENT CARTER. DESAI  
TENDS TO SEE ISSUES IN TERMS OF MORAL PRINCIPLES AND  
CLEARLY BELIEVES THAT THE NATURE OF THEIR RELIGIOUS  
CONVICTIONS CAUSE HIS AND THE PRESIDENT'S VIEWPOINTS  
TO BE MUCH THE SAME. UNLIKE MRS GANDHI, DESAI HAS BEEN  
WILLING--EVEN EAGER--TO DISCUSS DIFFICULT ISSUES IN  
MEETINGS WITH VISITORS. WE HAVE ALSO FOUND HIM SENSITIVE  
TO ANYTHING WHICH IMPLIES DISCRIMINATION AGAINST,  
OR LESS THAN EQUAL TREATMENT OF, INDIA. ACCORDING TO  
HIS PERSONAL PHILOSOPHY, ON ISSUES OF PRINCIPLE, DESAI  
WILL NOT COMPROMISE; ON MATTERS OF OPINION, HE IS  
WILLING TO ACCEPT OPPOSING VIEWS WHEN THEY ARE DOMINANT.

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3. A DISCIPLE OF MAHATMA GANDHI, DESAI JOINED THE  
CONGRESS PARTY DURING THE FREEDOM STRUGGLE AND HAS LONG  
BEEN A LEADING FIGURE IN INDIAN GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS.  
HE SERVED AS DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER AND FINANCE MINISTER  
UNDER PRIME MINISTER INDIRA GANDHI IN THE LATE 1960'S,  
BUT BROKE WITH HER IN 1969 IN A BITTER DISPUTE WHICH  
ULTIMATELY LED TO THE SPLIT IN THE CONGRESS PARTY.

DESAI BECAME CHAIRMAN OF THE OPPOSITION CONGRESS BLOC IN PARLIAMENT, AND, AS A STAUNCH OPPONENT OF THE PM, WAS A MAJOR FIGURE IN THE AGITATIONAL MOVEMENT AGAINST MRS GANDHI IN 1975. IMPRISONED UPON THE DECLARATION OF THE EMERGENCY IN JUNE 1975, HE WAS DETAINED UNTIL THE ANNOUNCEMENT OF NATIONAL ELECTIONS IN JANUARY 1977. WHEN THE MAJOR NON-COMMUNIST OPPOSITION PARTIES FORMED THE JANATA PARTY SOON AFTERWARDS, HE WAS UNANIMOUSLY NAMED ITS CHAIRMAN. AFTER BECOMING PRIME MINISTER, HE RELINQUISHED THIS POSITION.

4. DESAI IS A GANDHIAN IN IDEOLOGY, SPIRIT AND PERSONAL HABITS. POPULARLY KNOWN AS MORARJIBHAI OR JUST MORARJI, HE HAS A REPUTATION FOR MORAL RECTITUDE, SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS AND INTEGRITY. THE PRIME MINISTER AFFECTS A FRUGAL, SPARTAN LIFE-STYLE AND IS A STRICT VEGETARIAN. HE IS VERY MUCH A MAN OF THE PEOPLE AND REGULARLY RECEIVES ORDINARY CITIZENS AT HIS RESIDENCE, WHO PETITION HIM FOR A REDRESS OF THEIR GRIEVANCES.

5. DESAI'S LONGSTANDING AMBITION TO BECOME PRIME MINISTER IS WELL KNOWN, PARTICULARLY SINCE HE WAS TWICE DEFEATED IN HIS BID FOR THE JOB IN THE 1960'S, THE SECOND TIME BY MRS GANDHI. HE ASSUMED OFFICE WITH THE REPUTATION OF BEING ARROGANT, STUBBORN AND UNCOMPRO-MISING. MANY OBSERVERS SAY THAT 19 MONTHS OF IMPRI-CONFIDENTIAL

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SONMENT MELLOWED HIM, HOWEVER, AND THAT HE IS NOW MUCH LESS RIGID AND SELF-RIGHTEOUS.

6. POLITICALLY, DESAI IS DEEPLY COMMITTED TO DEMOCRACY AND IS FIRMLY OPPOSED TO INDIAN COMMUNISTS, ALTHOUGH HE HAS INDICATED A DETERMINATION TO WORK IN AN EVEN-HANDED WAY WITH THE NEW COMMUNIST STATE GOVERNMENT IN WEST BENGAL. WHILE FRIENDLY TOWARD THE WEST, HE HAS OCCASIONALLY CRITICIZED THE US IN THE PAST, PARTICULARLY ON THE QUESTION OF ARMS SUPPLY TO PAKISTAN. HE IS STRONGLY OPPOSED TO INDIA'S DEVELOPING NUCLEAR WEAPONS. ON DOMESTIC POLICY, THE PRIME MINISTER FAVORS POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC DECENTRALIZATION OF POWER AND A GREATER EMPHASIS ON RURAL DEVELOPMENT AND COTTAGE INDUSTRIES.

7. SINCE ASSUMING OFFICE, DESAI HAS TRAVELED ABROAD ONLY ONCE, IN JUNE TO ATTEND THE COMMONWEALTH CONFERENCE, STOPPING OFF ENROUTE IN TEHRAN AND PARIS.

8. DESAI'S STATESMANSHIP AND TACT ARE BEING PUT TO THE TEST AS HE SEEKS TO MANAGE A CABINET COMPOSED OF

MINISTERS OF DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS AND POINTS OF VIEW  
REFLECTING JANATA'S HETEROGENEOUS ANTECEDENTS. THUS  
FAR, HE APPEARS TO BE QUIETLY ASSERTING HIS INFLUENCE  
OVER HIS GOVERNMENT. ON THE OTHER HAND, HE HAS LEFT  
THE MANAGEMENT OF JANATA PARTY AFFAIRS TO HIS LIEUTEN-  
ANTS AND APPARENTLY PREFERS TO REMAIN ALOOF FROM THE  
FREQUENT SQUABBLES WHICH PLAGUE THE PARTY.  
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